

MIGRATION NARRATIVES, OFFICIAL CLASSIFICATIONS,
AND LOCAL IDENTITIES: THE MEMBA OF THE HIDDEN
LAND OF PACHAKSHIRI

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines oral and written origin and migration narratives of the Memba, a little-known eastern Himalayan highland society inhabiting the present-day Mechukha Circle area of West Siang (Arunachal Pradesh, India).¹ These narratives mainly concern Memba memories of previous migration to, and settlement in, the so-called ‘hidden land’ (Tib. *sbas yul*)² of Pachakshiri (Tib. *sBas chags shing ri*),³ being the valley now known as Mechukha (Tib. *sMan chu kha*). Based upon recent oral data recorded in Mechukha, and a survey of all the available documents and accounts about the area and its population, this study will demonstrate two points: that migration narratives are still very relevant to contemporary Memba identity and their claims to being the legal and rightful owners and occupants of their territory; and that the view long-held by outside observers and today by the Indian state, that Memba are a single population of common origins who actually live in two different locations—Mechukha Circle and Tuting/Geling Circles to the east—is problematic and in need of reassessment.

THE MEMBA OF PACHAKSHIRI

The territory known by local Memba inhabitants of Mechukha Circle as

¹ Fieldwork data on the Memba of Mechukha and the inhabitants of Tuting area was gathered during 2007-2009 as part of the project *Between Tibetanization and Tribalization: Towards a New Anthropology of Tibeto-Burman-Speaking Highlanders in Arunachal Pradesh*, directed by Prof. Toni Huber (Humboldt University, Berlin) and funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn.

² All proper Tibetan spellings in the main text are romanized using the Wylie system and preceded by the abbreviation Tib.

³ There are at least four Tibetan variations of the name: *sBad lcags shing yul*, *sBas chags shing gi ri*, *sBas chags shri*, and *sBa lcags sher ri ljongs*. English language sources from India also give it mixed treatment, with Billorey 1998:64 having ‘Rajashiri’, which he translates as ‘hidden heaven’, and the ‘Vheza Shingiri’ of Dutta 2000.

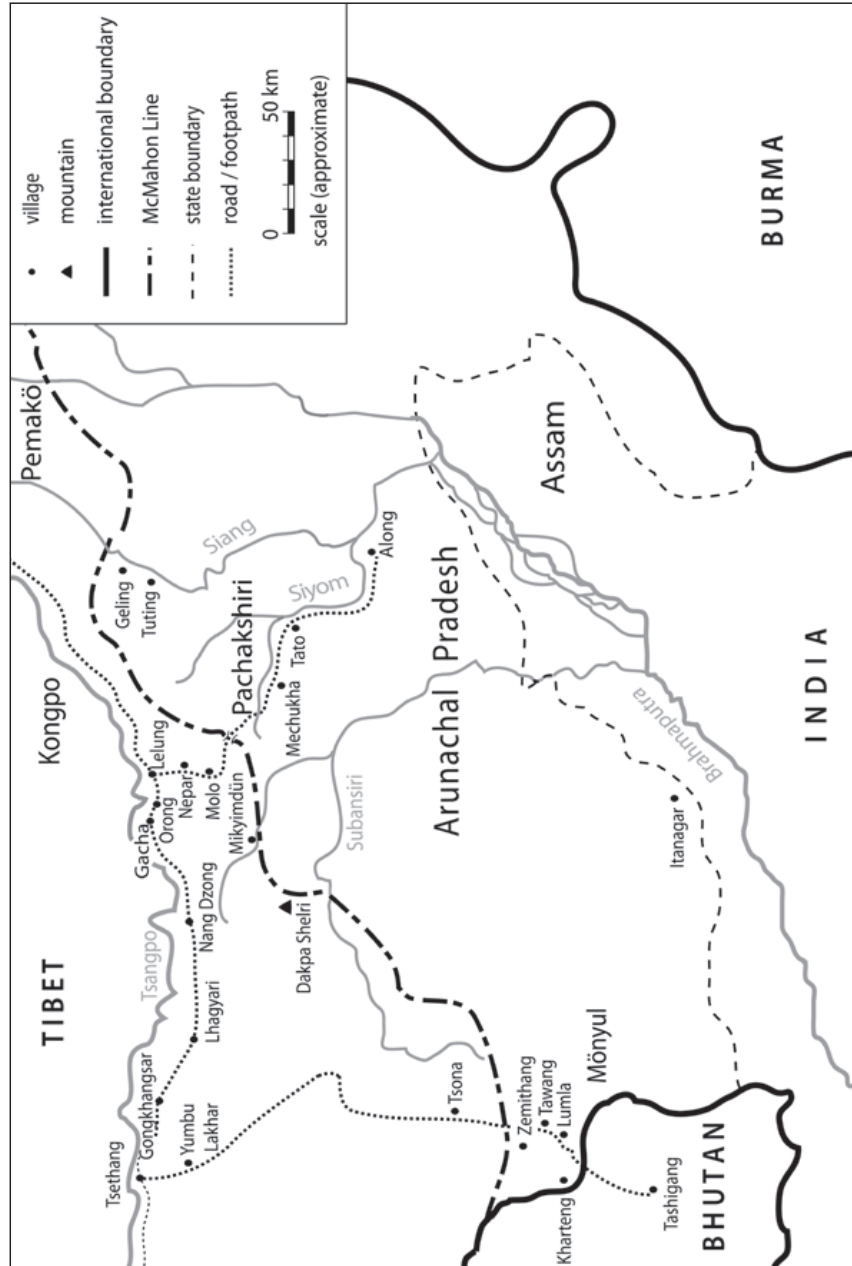


Figure 7.1. Map of sites related to the Memba in the eastern Himalaya.



Figure 7.2. Mechukha valley view north (photograph by Kerstin Grothmann, 2007).

the ‘hidden land’ of Pachakshiri is located at an altitude of approximately 1900m in the north-western corner of West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. The wide river valley is flanked by two snow-capped mountain ranges, the Damchen La (Tib. Dam can la) to the northeast and the Shinjong La (Tib. Zhing skyongs la) to the southwest. Memba settlements are located mainly along the sunnier northern bank of the Yargyab Chu (Tib. Yar rgyab chu) river and are composed of various clusters of houses each bearing a common name. While official ‘village’ names are nowadays applied by the state, among themselves Memba villagers still use the individual house cluster names to identify their place of residence or birth.

Although Memba territory fell south of the 1914 McMahon Line that was agreed in principle and represented upon both British and Tibetan maps, the administrative power of the British colonial government in India never reached as far as Pachakshiri prior to 1947. In 1951, the first representatives of the newly independent Indian state arrived in the valley and established an administrative post, and they classified the local inhabitants with the name Memba. At that time, according to all local accounts, the valley dwellers referred to themselves as either the

Nānang (Tib. gNas nang) or Pachakshiriba (Tib. sBas chags shing ri ba). While Pachakshiriba simply means ‘one from Pachakshiri’, Nānang can mean something like ‘inside (Tib. nang) the holy place (Tib. gnas)’, and the significance of this will be clarified by the discussion to follow. Regardless of meaning or the connotations which the generic Tibetan term Memba (i.e., a phonetic variant of Tib. Mon pa) carries (see below), it was taken by the government and transformed into a classificatory referent for a population under new administration. The name for the new administrative centre, and the entire region, was adopted from the first Memba settlement, Mechukha, which the government party arrived at upon initially entering the valley. Up until the mid-1950s, the Memba continued to pay taxes to the Lhasa-based, Tibetan aristocratic Lhalu (Tib. lHa klu) family who held the area as an estate,⁴ and such payments were made via the administration of the adjacent Tibetan district of Gacha (Tib. sGar chags) to the north. The Memba had extensive trade relations with both the neighbouring Tibeto-Burman-speaking highland societies to the south and Tibetans to the north, and acted to some extent as intermediaries between them. With the development of Indian administration in their region, Memba relations with Tibet declined significantly and came to an abrupt end, as did all their profits from trade, during and after the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict. In July 1990, the Mechukha Subdivision was declared autonomous with its headquarters in Mechukha township. Its population of approximately 10,000 persons⁵ officially consists of Bokar, Memba, Ramo and Pailibo ‘tribes’, of which the Memba make up at least one quarter.⁶ The Memba act as an exogamous, polygynous society in relation to other Tibetan Buddhist societies but are endogamous in relation to non-Buddhists. Arranged marriages are common. However, these traditions are all in transition among the younger generation.

A range of features, including ‘primitive’ traits, geographical isolation, distinct culture, shyness of contact with outside agents, and economic ‘backwardness’ were all used by the Indian state to classify local

⁴ Both Shing sdong 1988:67 and bDe rab Tshe rdor 1988:73 mention that Pachakshiri belonged to the 12th Dalai Lama’s paternal family and was later assigned to Lhalu.

⁵ See *Statistical Handbook of West Siang District – 2005*. 2006. District Statistical Office Along, West Siang District.

⁶ There is no precise population data available for the Memba of Mechukha. The numbers we find in published literature cover both groups officially classified as Memba, who dwell in Mechukha and Tuting. The official Electoral Roll for Mechukha of 2008 lists approximately 2000 Memba who are entitled to vote, and to these must be added an unknown number of minors and those Mechukha Memba officially residing outside the region in hill towns such as Along and Itanagar.

communities such as the Memba as ‘tribes’. This classification system paid little or no attention whatsoever to the self-perceptions of these groups. The entries on the Memba in several encyclopaedias published in India are indicative of this, and repeat more or less the same short assertions made about language, migration, group or clan division, eating habits, marriage customs, major festivals and relation to neighbouring tribes or the Tibetans to the north.⁷ The absence of sufficient field studies, and no critical and comparative analysis of the available reliable data, has led to the assumption in India that there are two populations living in separate places who together constitute Memba society, that is, the Memba of Mechukha and the Memba of the region of Pemakö (Tib. Padma bkod) which is some 100 km to the northeast in the upper Siang Valley. Official documents make no distinction between them and label the populations of both areas with the common name Memba.⁸ Published studies by Indian scholars⁹ who focus only upon the Memba of Mechukha, fail to make any clear distinction between them and the population in Pemakö. In what follows, I will give a preliminary argument for the existence of two different societies in Mechukha and Pemakö based largely upon their migration histories. Further research in the region of Pemakö in the future would be desirable to confirm more details of what I will set forth below.

THE MEMBA OF MECHUKHA AND PEMAKÖ

The places where the Memba of Arunachal Pradesh settled are Mechukha valley in the north-western corner of West Siang District and the area around Tuting (Tib. Tu lding) and Geling (Tib. dGe gling, or dGe ring), which is also known as Pemakö, in the north of Upper Siang District. In Tibetan societies in general, place of residence is almost always a highly significant aspect of identification and self-identity, and with this in mind we can note that Memba is not an autonym used by either the Mechukha or Pemakö populations. They refer to themselves as Pachakshiriba and Pemaköpa respectively. The name Memba¹⁰ is actually a phonetic variant of the generic Tibetan ethnonym Mönpa

⁷ See, for example, Singh 1994:769-70, Choudhury 1995:195-99, Choudhury 2004:1036-40.

⁸ See, for example, Choudhury 1994:3, 73.

⁹ See Billorey 1998:63-7, Dutta 1998:36-40, Dutta 2000:45-64, Dutta 2006 and Badu 2002.

¹⁰ Variant forms in the European language literature include Menba, Moinba, Mönba and Mempa.

(Tib. *Mon pa*), which simply means “one from Mön”, and which is widely used to designate very different societies and groups across time and space.¹¹ The name has often been associated with the notion of being non-Buddhist, in the sense of lacking the high culture or civilisation associated with Buddhism by Tibetan elites and thus it carries the strong connotation of ‘barbarian’. Mönpa has frequently been applied to different groups living on the southern and south-eastern slopes of the Himalaya, especially in parts of eastern Bhutan and the neighbouring West Kameng District—including Tawang, Dirang and Kalaktang—of present-day Arunachal Pradesh. Even though these ‘Mönpa’ groups were, in the course of their history, converted (Tib. *'dul ba*) to and influenced by Buddhism—and therefore in the Tibetan discourse, raised at least onto the scale of ‘civilisation’—from the central Tibetan point of view they often appear to have never been fully included in what was considered to be the properly civilised world.

When Nem Singh, one of the ‘Pandit’ explorer-spies in the employ of the British colonial government of India, visited the Tibetan areas of Orong and Gacha just north of Pachakshiri in 1878/79, he reported of the people visiting there from the south that, “They are called Mönbas by the Tibetans, who give the same name to the Lepchas of Sikkim. [...] They call themselves Pachakshiriba.”¹² In more recent times, among themselves the people of Pachakshiri rather prefer to call themselves Nänang, as do neighbouring Tibetan communities: “The people from Molo, Orong and Gacha call us Nänang. Some from Lhasa call us Pachakshiri. Some call us Mijim Thangba or Tsari Mijim Thangba. The other tribal people call us Memba or Nyema. This is Lopa language.”¹³ We find differentiations within these local designations, and it seems that the further the place the more precise is the usage of the toponym. For example, Tsari Mijim Thangba (Tib. *Tsa ri Mi khyim bdun ba*) is the name of a village in the very south of the Tsari region to the west.¹⁴ But the closer the place, for instance Orong, Gacha and Molo which all belonged to the same former Tibetan administrative district as Pachakshiri, the less it seems necessary to use the exact location as reference. Instead characteristics of the place such as its perceived sacredness as a holy place or *nä* (Tib. *gnas*) are favored. Central Tibetans collectively labeled another group inhabiting the same region as Lopa (Tib. *Klo pa*), which emphatically

¹¹ See Pommaret 1999, Aris 1979 and Bellezza 2008:21-2.

¹² Harman 1915:211.

¹³ Interview with Tashi Naksang from Dechenthang in March 2008.

¹⁴ Also known as Lo Mikyimdün (Tib. *Klo Mi khyim bdun*), see Huber 1999:131ff.

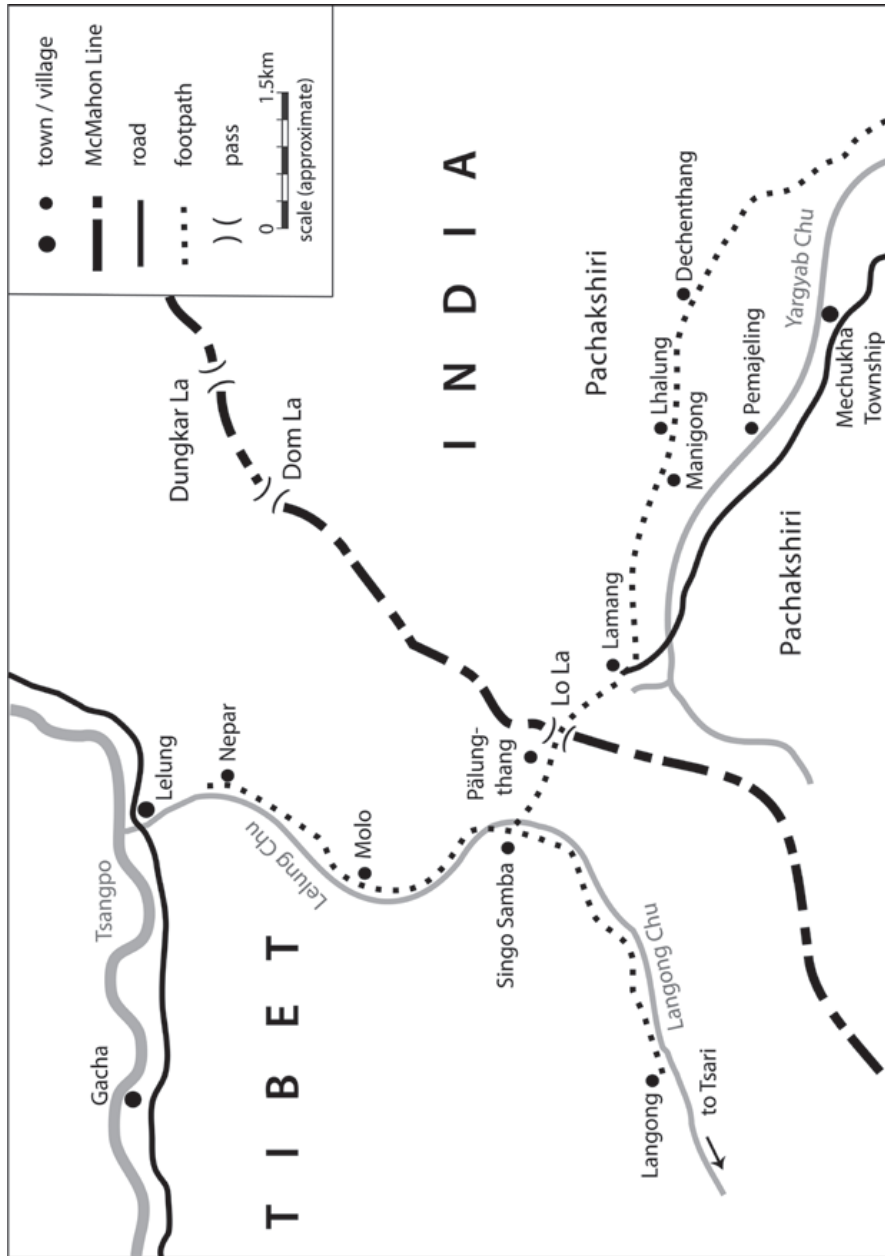


Figure 7.3. Map of Pachakshiri and adjacent Tibetan sites.

means ‘barbarian’.¹⁵ This blanket designation covers all non-Buddhist populations in the southeastern Himalaya whom the Tibetans characterise as savage or wild, living in the jungle in a hostile and untamed environment, and as subsisting on hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. The so-called ‘Lopa’ who are neighbours of the Pachakshiriba describe the latter as Nyema, a variation of the ethnonym (also Nyime or Nyimak) which is commonly in use by various Tani-speaking hill peoples throughout central Arunachal to refer to ‘Tibetans’ and ‘Tibet’ to the north more generally.¹⁶ But they also adopted the generic Tibetan term Mönpa or Memba to designate their Buddhist neighbours. It is probably this fact, and the acquisition by different generations of outside explorers and administrators of this identity referent from neighbouring non-Buddhist peoples, that led to the identification of one so-called ‘Memba’ society in two different locations.

Even though most of the early western explorers to visit the far eastern Himalaya and the British colonial administration knew of the local autonyms that different hill communities used to identify themselves, they frequently did not take these into account in their descriptions and classifications. George Dunbar, for example, who visited the Pemakö region in 1913, stated that he adopted the name Memba for the people in Pemakö from the neighbouring non-Buddhist Tangam tribe. He also noted that these same Memba were to be found in Bhutan and were settled in Pemakö at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Similarly, many of the other neighbouring non-Buddhist tribes use the term Memba, although they have their own word, Mimat,¹⁸ to collectively label the Buddhist populations who “[...] live close to the snow-line, dress in skins, and are spoken of by the Abors with disgust and contempt”, as Arthur Bentinck reported.¹⁹ Indeed, the common use by non-Buddhist tribes of the terms Mönpa or Memba to label their Buddhist neighbours seems to be a reaction to the degrading Tibetan term Lopa being applied to themselves. Concerning the migration history of the Buddhist population of Pemakö whom outsiders like the Tangam and Dunbar labelled as Memba, we know from Frederick Marshman Bailey that:

¹⁵ For some further elaborations on the term Lopa, see Huber 2011, Huber 1999:179-81, Huber 1997:226.

¹⁶ See, for examples, Blackburn 2003/2004:49, n.46 on the Apatani, and Huber 2010 on the Mra.

¹⁷ Dunbar 1916:93.

¹⁸ The term Mimat is still in use, whereas Memba is used with outsiders from the region.

¹⁹ Bentinck 1913:105.

The descendants of these first immigrants now form to a large extent the population of the valley; they are called Mönbas or Drukpas indiscriminately: the former name means an inhabitant of the Tibetan district of Mönnyul near Tawang, and the latter means Bhutanese. They still speak a dialect of Mönba, the language spoken near Tawang.²⁰

This assertion corresponds to some extent with the present-day statements of the Pemaköpa inhabitants of Tuting area about their own migration and identity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, only a few Buddhist families were settled in Tuting. However, the place became the main settlement for Pemakö inhabitants south of the McMahon Line as a result of migration between 1959 and 1962 following the Chinese military occupation of Tibet and the Sino-Indian border conflict. Subsequently, the Buddhist population of this region was officially classified by the Indian authorities into three ‘tribes’, namely Khampa, Lama and Memba. The classification Memba is locally rejected by many since for them it clearly designates the people of the Tawang region, i.e., the ‘Mönpa’. Khampa refers to the non-Tshangla speaking Buddhist population that migrated mainly from the Metog Dzong area, although the term is also often synonymously used for ‘Tibetans’ or Böpa (Tib. Bod pa). Lama, Drukpa and Pemaköpa are the autonoms which are used as terms of self-reference by the Tshangla-speaking population of the region who trace their origins back to Bhutan but who distance themselves clearly from the people of the Tawang region. In 1968, the Indian government philologist B. Shastri stated in his notes of a tour in the Siang valley that the dialect of the Memba in the Tuting area is virtually the same as that of the Mönpa in Kameng District.²¹

During eastward migrations from Bhutan and Tawang about two centuries ago,²² a small group of migrants appear to have entered the Pachakshiri valley and settled at its northwestern corner at a place named Lhalung. Frederick Marshman Bailey wrote of these migrants that they “...are known as Pachakshiribas. They speak Mönba among

²⁰ Bailey 1914:2, whose reporting is to be viewed as reliable since he spoke Tibetan fairly fluently and had visited the regions, including Bhutan, which are being discussed here.

²¹ See Shastri 1968:3. Any information on the language spoken by the Khampa in Tuting is missing in the report.

²² According to the 1878/79 report by Nem Singh, “[...the Pachakshiriba] had many villages near the line of route from Tsetang to Tawang and Odalguri in Assam”; see Harman 1915:211. With the help of Nem Singh’s statement, some of these places might be tentatively identified (see map) as follows: Tashikhang, Kartheng, Lumla, Tawang, with Ugyeling and Sangyeling in the immediate vicinity, Zemithang, Tsona, Ongbagang (Yum bu bla mkhar), Ye Gongmo Khangsar or Agom Khangsar (E Yul, Gong khang gsar), Lhagyari (IHa rgya ri), Dakpnang (Dwags po Nang rDzong) and Lelung.



Figure 7.4. View of Lhalung (photograph by Kerstin Grothmann, 2007).

themselves, but those we met could all speak good Kongpo Tibetan.”²³ One of the prominent clans in Mechukha is Naksang, and according to their migration narrative they came from Urgyeling and Sangyeling near Tawang via Kharteng, Lumla, Zemithang and Tsona,²⁴ and from there onwards were accompanied by the Tsona clan which was on pilgrimage to Tsari. The Naksang migrants first settled in the Lhalung area of Pachakshiri, and their ‘Mönpa’ language from the Tawang area would not have been well understood in the region. Indeed, Nem Singh reported that at Orong just to the north an interpreter was kept for those who visited from Pachakshiri.²⁵ The language of the Naksang migrants was also not understood by the other clans of Pachakshiri and is almost lost nowadays. Thus, contemporary informants report that “The people of Molo and Gacha speak the same language as we do. At Lhasa they speak a little different but we understand each other.”²⁶ This is because the common dialect in Mechukha nowadays is that of the adjacent Tibetan region of Kongpo, as are the local dress and hairstyle. In fact, in 1913 Frederick Marshman Bailey observed that “they wear Tibetan clothes except for their foot-gear [...]. They do their hair in two queues in the Kongpo fashion; the Mönbas of Pemakö as well as those of Mönnyul [...] cut their hair short.”²⁷

The presumed migration from parts of Bhutan and Tawang at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the languages from that same region spoken by most of these migrants, has led to the assumption that

²³ Bailey 1914:18.

²⁴ Urgyeling and Sangyeling are about 3 km south of Tawang monastery. Kharteng and Lumla are further to the south-west of Tawang, while Zemithang is to the north-west and Tsona to the north.

²⁵ Harman 1915:211.

²⁶ Interview with Tashi Naksang from Dechenthang, March 2008. Similar statements were made by all informants who had visited Tibet prior to 1962.

²⁷ Bailey 1914:18.

the inhabitants of Mechukha and Pemaikö are all the same people only settled in different places. Explorers and administrative officers entering from the south uncritically adopted the generic term Memba which they heard from neighbouring communities and then transformed it into a tribal label. Seemingly trivial statements on clothing and hairstyle in earlier reports, and the known local autononyms and ethnonyms, were not seriously considered or they were neglected, and further research by independent anthropologists had not taken place until my own study of the area. Outside classifications and insufficient descriptions were thus used to classify local populations, and despite many differences between some communities, they were nevertheless grouped together in order to administer and incorporate these societies into the modern Indian nation state. Thus, the peoples of Pachakshiri and Pemaikö were listed by the Indian administration as one tribe, the Memba, during the 1950s, and went on to share the same fate as other independent societies in Arunachal Pradesh, even though they themselves have a clear idea where they come from, who they are and who they are not.

THE IDEA OF *BEYÜL* — ‘HIDDEN LANDS’

Unlike other tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, the Memba of Mechukha do not have a single narration explaining their migration process or route to Pachakshiri, although we can reconstruct it to a certain point using other sources. Rather, of much larger importance for the Memba sense of origin and identity is a narrative about the exploration of the ‘hidden land’ of Pachakshiri and its transformation into a habitable place.

According to later Tibetan historiographies, Buddhism was established as a state religion in Tibet during the ninth century by the figure of Padmasambhava, and this beginning is closely associated with the construction of the Samye monastery by Emperor Trisong Detsan. The Memba are followers of the Nyingmapa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, a movement which places particular emphasis upon the narratives about Padmasambhava as a founder figure. One such set of narratives relate Padmasambhava concealing several valleys as ‘hidden lands’ or *beyül* (Tib. *sbas yul*) on the southern slopes of the Himalaya during his journey to Tibet. There are written Tibetan texts that describe routes to these *beyül*, and the means by which such places will be discovered and opened in the future, a task only to be undertaken by accomplished Buddhist masters. The hidden lands were meant to be sanctuaries in times of chaos and disorder where people from every strata of Tibetan

society could find refuge and form an idealised society with a king as the legitimate ruler to preserve moral and political values.²⁸ *Beyül* are not only a refuge; they are also places of Buddhist realisation, where advanced practitioners gain greater insight for their own and others' benefit, and where sacred treasures will be revealed. Perceived as being situated right at the border between the civilised Tibetan world and the uncivilised tribal world, these places not only have to be discovered, they also have to be opened and transformed into a suitable and fertile territory to shelter a certain number of people. As it is represented in the Tibetan texts, this opening and transformation phase has to be read as a civilising process. A powerful master has to subdue all local deities and non-human forces and bind them by oath to protect Buddhism, the religious system that must be introduced to the local non-civilised population who may already be inhabiting the place. This notion of an ideal society that re-establishes law and order in a predetermined land and which preserves and protects moral and religious values is an important part of Memba identity, and in particular one used for drawing distinctions with their tribal neighbours. For instance, one local narrative has it that all those who now live in the region were once without a written script and a religion, but they all received these from Tibetan Buddhist Lamas. The Memba wrote the religious teaching down upon stones, while their 'Lopa' neighbours wrote them down on animal skins. One day the Lopa got very hungry, but there was no food left. They boiled the skins and ate them, and so both script and religion were lost. Thus, the Memba consider themselves superior to the neighbouring tribes since they are the sole inhabitants of the region with an indigenous script, an organised religion, and therefore a 'civilised culture'.

WRITTEN ACCOUNTS OF PACHAKSHIRI'S ESTABLISHMENT

Being literate, the Memba have two textual sources²⁹ relating aspects of Pachakshiri as a *beyül* and how it came to be inhabited. One of these texts contains significant material about migration into and settlement of

²⁸ On the concept of Tibetan Buddhist hidden lands, see Childs 1999, and Childs in this volume.

²⁹ According to Memba informants, both of these texts (see the details given below and in the Bibliography) were taken by the Chinese in 1962. However, according to Tibetan refugees who dwelt in Mechukha for some years, the texts were voluntarily delivered to the Chinese at the time, as a kind of symbolic gesture towards the possible new ruling power in the area.

the valley. The first text is of the ‘itinerary’ genre³⁰ and is entitled *The Itinerary of Pachakshing valley called ‘Self-liberation on Seeing’*. The text was revealed by one Dudjom Tsal from the Ketshel cave in Kongpo.³¹ The narrative is composed as a dialog between Padmasambhava and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal, who is said to have concealed the text at Ketshel. It describes where and when the designated master will find Pachakshiri and by what means he will open this ‘principal’ sanctuary.³² However, it contains no information about a possible migration. The meaning of the name Pachakshiri—given in the form sBas lcags shing yul—is glossed in the text as follows:

Sbas pa means that, in future, when evil armies from beyond the frontiers invade, it is the place where living beings will go. *Chags*³³ *pa* means that in future the spread of the explanation and accomplishment of the [Buddhist] teachings will be established. *Shing yul* means that red and white Sandalwood, Aloe and other [precious trees] are there in their entirety. Being equivalent to the paradises of the five ideal Buddhas, its advantageous qualities are beyond description.

This text is only known to a few religious specialists in Mechukha, and it is not used in ritual performances or daily life. To fully understand it, one has to have advanced knowledge of particular religious traditions.

The second written account belongs to the “regulations for public guidance” (Tib. *bca’ yig*) genre, and is in the form of a long, handwritten scroll without title.³⁴ The first half of the text presents information on the discovery of Pachakshiri, its opening and the migration process, and names the religious masters and others involved. The numerous spelling and grammatical errors and fragmentary sentences due to physical

³⁰ The Memba themselves refer to the text as *gnas yig*, even though its written title includes the word *lam yig*; see the Bibliography for details. Thanks to Matthew Akester who translated it.

³¹ *Bdud ’joms rtsal kyis kong gi rke tshal phug pa nas ston pa’o*. Treating this name as an abbreviated form, there are two immediate possibilities as for his identity: bDud ’joms rol pa rtsal (born nineteenth cent.); or bDud ’joms gling pa (1835-1904), whose secret initiatory name was bDud ’joms rdo rje gro lod rtsal. For a more precise identification further research will be necessary.

³² Pachakshiri is in fact one of the minor and less well-known Himalayan *beyül*, for which no other Tibetan language guidebook-style text has currently come to light, to my present knowledge.

³³ This element is spelled *lcags* (meaning ‘iron’) on the title page, and is typical of the variation in spelling of the whole name in different sources.

³⁴ This scroll of local handmade paper is approximately 3m long and 40cm wide. When I recorded it, it was in poor condition with its upper part and margins torn. It is in the possession of the Gompa Secretary, P.C. Kigar. I am grateful to Tsewang Norbu who worked through the text with me.

damage make a dependable translation of the text difficult, and in some parts even impossible. The following passage is thus a summary focusing on data that help illustrate the text's particular version of the migration process. The text begins with a description of a past era when religion in Tibet declined and epidemics occurred. Then:

Kham Kathog Lama Sogyal received a vision and was the first who went via Samgarong to Pemajeling,³⁵ where he stayed in meditation for some time. Later, Lama Lodre Gyamtsho went on pilgrimage to the Sogyal cave where he had many extraordinary visions and was able to stay in meditation for almost eight years. After that he went to Par, and together with Rumdo Abo and others he went on pilgrimage. But something caused them great fear, so they couldn't proceed further and had to stop. There was the question of whether the time for the countless *beyüls* has arrived or not. "Will it be helpful to the Dharma or beneficial for the people, if I [Lodre Gyamtso], with all my responsibility, were to declare the place as a *beyül*, a holy place where people will settle and build roads?" Rumdo Abo, Tsetan Norbu [...] and I, together with 40 labourers, took off for pilgrimage. Drubchen Chözang Namgyal and Changchü Lingpa wanted to stay there during winter and build a Stupa at Dechen[thang]³⁶ to cast out all evil from that region. Two Lamas and ten other people stayed near Pemajeling. In the Wood Dragon Year (=1724/25), the Samye Chökyong told me to invite Tagsham Chogtrül on the tenth day of the Monkey Month. Everything was arranged, but he was not able to come. Rumdo Abo and Tsetan Norbu, together with 20 labourers, were sent to the west entrance via Pälungthang³⁷ for the construction of roads. Norbu constructed the first building, a small temple at Pemajeling. In autumn, headman Tenzin Norbu, accompanied by 50 labourers, came to construct roads. Again in the Fire Sheep Year (=1727/28), people constructed and repaired roads as well as bridges. In the Earth Monkey Year (=1728/29), Menchu Lama, Tashi Dorje and 20 labourers came and their work was successful. In the Earth Bird Year (=1729/30), the great government gave the order to the people of Tsegang and Tongshongog, that whatever labour would be necessary should be provided. Already prior to the Water Hare Year (=1723/24), it was evident that the place was special. Irrespective of the subjects, all necessary things and favourable conditions should be provided for this pilgrimage site. This is how the place was inhabited.

This section gives us some clear indications of a migration process being carried out in successive waves headed by accomplished Buddhist masters and rooted in the local landscape of the valley whose names and features are still current today. The climax of this migration must

³⁵ A place at the river bank where the first temple of Pachakshiri was built.

³⁶ The largest Stupa of the valley is near the village Dechenthang.

³⁷ The village of Pälungthang is on the northern side of the Lola pass.

have been under the guidance of Lama Lodre Gyamtso. According to the scroll's colophon, it was in fact he who wrote the text in the Iron Pig Year (=1731/32) of the twelfth sixty-year cycle.³⁸ Within a period of about seven years the place was explored and transformed by groups who carried out labour service. Several persons from these groups remained in Pachakshiri, without returning to their native places. After constructing the necessary infrastructure, religious buildings were established and people began to till fields and raise livestock. This back and forth movement of labour groups implies that a part of the migrants came from places not too far away from Pachakshiri, probably places to the north across the mountains within the former Tibetan administrative district of Gacha. If the text is to be believed, this migration during the third decade of the eighteenth century would have been about a century earlier than the migration of Mönpa reported by Frederick Marshman Bailey and Nem Singh. Any Mönpa coming from the greater Tawang region with this later migration must have become almost completely assimilated, or at least within the last 70-80 years, since we find only very few people of that age in Mechukha who still speak a Mönpa language from the west. We could assume that they only ever formed a minor part of the total Pachakshiriba community. Interestingly, their tradition of migration from the west, while absent from the written texts, forms an important part of the oral migration tradition, as we will see below.

Following the section on exploration and settlement of Pachakshiri that we have summarised above, the text of the scroll comments on correct moral and religious behaviour, the relationship between the king and his subjects, and the establishment of law and social and religious order. It also gives directions how the society should deal with newcomers or tribal neighbours. It is an explanation and justification of the Pachakshiribas' rights as the chosen community, those who have been assigned to preserve and protect the standards of an ideal society in the 'hidden land'. This is written down in a definitive form which can hardly respond to outside influences. This same kind of discourse does not occur overtly in the oral tradition but is present as a kind of subtext.

ORAL ACCOUNTS OF PACHAKSHIRI'S ESTABLISHMENT

Local oral narratives of origins and migration found among many non-Buddhist highland societies of Arunachal Pradesh often begin by relating

³⁸ The colophon goes on to mention that the text was later completed by Sonam Gelek Rabtan Lhawang in the Earth Horse Year of the twelfth sixty-year cycle (=1738/39).

their descent from the sky, or the creation of a place where life starts to flourish, or rivalries and conflicts among siblings resulting in separation and migration, and so on.³⁹ Memba oral narratives of migration, on the other hand, closely resemble the Tibetan literary genre of guidebooks to holy places. They are descriptions of the religious geography of a holy place and function as an aid for pilgrims, and therefore enjoy great popularity. They not only provide interesting and useful information but also emphasise and revitalise events of religious and historical import and articulate them with local landscapes so that pilgrims can participate in the epic past and its sacred traces in various ways. Guidebooks are rarely if ever read or heard in their entirety but function rather more as a source of reference, verification or advice to be consulted for special occasions or at particular places, and their content is very often elaborated by additional oral stories at such sites. Whenever Memba saw my informant P.C. Kigar and me at some holy site around the Pachakshiri valley, be it during a pilgrimage or just while travelling past en route to their villages, they quickly rushed over to listen to the stories and explanations being expounded.⁴⁰

The Memba perform six pilgrimages to five major holy sites around the Pachakshiri valley during each twelve-month period.⁴¹ These pilgrimages are organised by the Gompa Committee,⁴² with the involvement of volunteers providing refreshments for the public at the beginning of each pilgrimage and also preparing the sites where rituals will be performed during the journey. At the different holy sites on any pilgrimage route, the events believed to have happened in the past are recalled there by presenting prayers and offerings. The story of the exploration and transformation of Pachakshiri into an inhabited place is not usually a part of ritual performances or found in daily life among the Memba. Only a few people like Lamas or lay persons with strong interests in local history and religion are familiar with the details of the story. Therefore,

³⁹ For example, see the discussion of narratives of origins and migration among the Mra by Huber 2010, and the Apatani by Blackburn 2003/2004, as well as the chapters by Blackburn, Huber and Aisher in this volume.

⁴⁰ P.C. Kigar is one of the most knowledgeable persons regarding the religious life of the Memba community. As Gompa Secretary, he represents approximately 50 religious specialists called Lama, and is involved in almost all decisions concerning the religious, social or political life of the community.

⁴¹ According to the Tibetan lunar calendar, these pilgrimages begin with the first annual event on the tenth day of the twelfth month, and then following on the fifteenth day of the first month, the fifteenth day of the second month, the twenty-fifth day of the second month, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, and finish with the final annual event on the fifteenth day of the eighth month.

⁴² The Gompa Committee consists of eight elected members from the Memba community.



Figure 7.5. Picnic atmosphere during pilgrimage (photograph by Kerstin Grothmann, 2007).

the annual pilgrimages are most welcome occasions since they offer opportunities to refresh former knowledge of the story or to add new details to it. It appears that nobody, aside from a few specialists, feels the need to be familiar with all the details or the chronological order of events in this story. Rather, what is most significant in it to the Memba is the overall idea of establishing themselves and living as the chosen people in a *beyül*, a special type of holy valley surrounded by hostile, non-Buddhist tribal neighbours.

Oral traditions are inherently dynamic, and they are often crafted according to the needs and circumstances of the present context of their telling. Thus, we do not find a single, comprehensive oral version of the story of Pachakshiri as a ‘hidden land’ of Memba settlement. The following is a version of the Memba oral story, one with a particular focus upon defining the boundaries of the ‘hidden land’, a topic that is of heightened significance for the Memba nowadays and in the recent past. It can be read in part as a response to the advent of the first road into the valley after 2002 and subsequent infiltration by more outsiders due to ease of access. Against the spectre of potential territorial competition, the story functions as proof of the more ancient claims of the Memba to

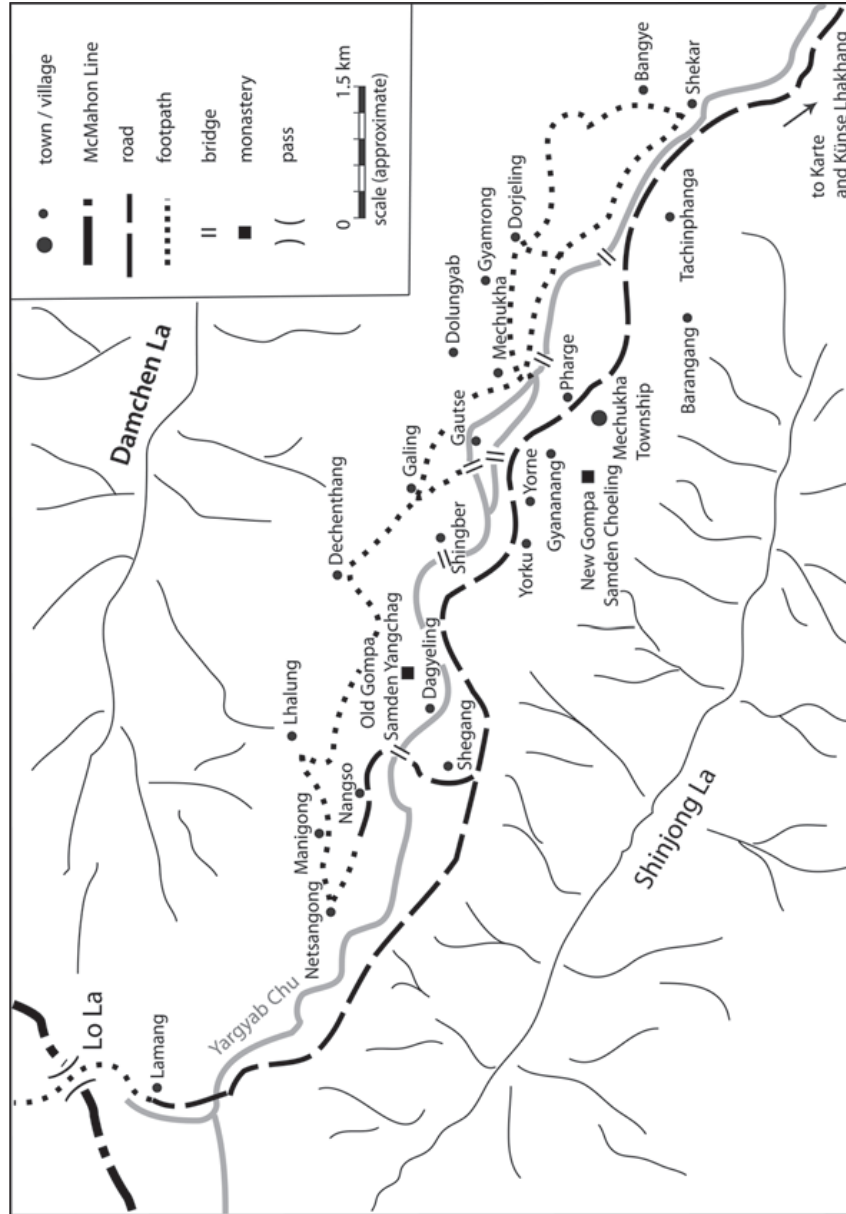


Figure 7.6. Map of the Mechukha valley.

have been the original migrants into, and settlers of, the valley:

On his way back to India, Padmasambhava placed hidden treasures in all places such as Tawang, Bomdila and Tuting that he had visited earlier, and told his disciples that it would be important to have a holy place in Pachakshiri. One Lama from Kham, Kathog Lama Sogyal Rinpoche, visited Pachakshiri and opened the place. He meditated at Pemajeling for many years. It is a part of Tsari.⁴³ That is why the place is also called Tsari Nänang [“Within the holy place of Tsari”]. On his way back to Tibet, he told many people about the place. Later, Gyalpo Yeshe Dorje⁴⁴ came to the region to open a new holy place. When he reached Tsari Chözam, he opened up a new pilgrimage. After his return to Tibet, he instructed Lama Lodre Gyamtso and Thangtong Gyalpo⁴⁵ to go to Pachakshiri. Both took different routes to enter the “hidden land”. Thangtong Gyalpo crossed the Dom La in the Manigong area and Lama Lodre Gyamtso crossed the Lo La into Pachakshiri. They went down following respectively the rivers of each area and were supposed to meet downstream at Tato, the conjunction of the two rivers. Lama Lodre Gyamtso was not able to proceed further and after hiding his key inside a rock at Künse Lhakhang, which will enable other Lamas in future to open further holy places, he went back and stopped at Karte where he met Thangtong Gyalpo. Together they built and consecrated a Stupa. At Karte we can see the footprints of Lama Lodre Gyamtso, his dog and horse. Thangtong Gyalpo was not successful in his mission to convert the people of the Manigong area to Buddhism and Lama Lodre Gyamtso only reached up to Künse Lhakhang. That is the reason why the Lopa don’t believe in Buddhism. Up to Künse Lhakhang the area belongs to Tibet. On the way back to Tibet both Lamas stopped at Pemajeling and from there Lama Lodre Gyamtso went to Lhalung. He saw that the place was not suitable to settle at. He put his walking stick made of sandalwood into the ground and wished, “Tonight there should be a flood, which flattens the place so people can settle here.” The next morning, the place was flat and he called it Lhalung, the ‘Valley of the Gods’. The stick grew into a tree and is still to be seen there. He also constructed a Chörten for the benefit of the people. After he did all this he returned to Tibet. He designated Yabme Pawo Dorje as his successor. The king of Gacha in Kongpo had a daughter who was very ugly and no one wanted to marry her. But suddenly she got pregnant and people were gossiping about how this could have happened. She delivered a son. When the boy reached the age of two years he went to the king and said, “Don’t accuse my mother of sex before marriage, I’m without father and my name is Yabme⁴⁶ Pawo Dorje.”

⁴³ For a comprehensive study on Tsari, see Huber 1999.

⁴⁴ This perhaps refers to Kyewo Yeshe Dorje (1101-1175), one of the first Lamas to open Tsari; see Huber 1999:63-6. Kyewo and Gyalpo are phonetically very similar and could be variants.

⁴⁵ Thangtong Gyalpo lived during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

⁴⁶ Yab med in Tibetan literally means “fatherless”.

By the age of 17, he left for Tsari accompanied by many other people. After crossing the Tsari Chu River and Lo La pass he came to Pachakshiri. He opened many new holy sites. He discovered Do Pemakö, the 'map-stone' of Tsari region that was made by the Buddha himself and actually belongs to Tsari, although nobody knows how it came to Pachakshiri. There is another stone called Shinjong Saptra, which is a map of Pachakshiri. Yabme Pawo Dorje meditated for a long time at Pemajeling and visualised the entire place: in the east there is a pilgrimage area called Shar Dorjeling; in the south there is a holy place called Lho Rinchenling; in the west there is Nub Pemaling which reaches until Tsari. In this area we find the pilgrimage sites Pema Shelphug, Tseriphug and Nä Sarma. And in the North there is Chang Gawaling. It reaches up to the border in the Manigong region. In between these main pilgrimage areas there exist other pilgrimage sites, and in total there are eight. Yabme Pawo Dorje performed many rituals at Pemajeling and many disciples and caretakers stayed with him. They all came together with him from Tibet. At that time, many problems occurred in Tibet. People didn't have enough food and whenever people went from here to Tibet, Yabme Pawo Dorje told them to spread the message that there is a place called Pachakshiri which is a good place to settle and whoever is willing to come is most welcome. Most of the people who settled at Pachakshiri came from Tibet. Only the Naksang clan came from Bhutan. First there was the oldest brother who came. After some time, when he didn't return to his native place, the second oldest brother left in search for him. But he also did not return, and so the youngest brother took off to find his elder brothers. He found them both settling in Pachakshiri, and since the place was nice he decided to settle down there as well. Other clans like Dorsom came from Tibet. The Kigar and Sharjo clans came from Ngabi, the Dabo clan from Dakpo, the Tsona clan from Tsona, the Tsugla clan from Lhagyari, and many other people came from Ye Gongmo Khangser and Kongpo. They all got the message about Pachakshiri and came here. The time for Yambe Pawo Dorje's return to Tibet came, but before he left he thought that the Tertön Chöje Lingpa Dakpo Kogi Lama should come to this place. He should be in charge. Then Chöje Lingpa came to Pachakshiri. Taksam Rinpoche was his father and Orgyen Chögyur Dechen Lingpa his younger brother. They came together, accompanied by 16 disciples, and stayed at Pemajeling where Chöje Lingpa constructed the first monastery and named it Samden Yangchag. The 16 disciples were divided into two groups. One group was not allowed to marry and have children. Their duty was meditation and the performance of rituals for the benefit of the people. The eight caves where they meditated are still there, and the place is called Drub Khang. The other group was allowed to marry and have children. Their duty was to provide food and clothes to the former group. They had to cultivate the land and perform rituals in people's houses. Chöje Lingpa was the one who gave the finishing touch to the place, to all pilgrimage places, and he was the one who taught the people. When Guru Rinpoche

stayed in Pachakshiri he established all pilgrimage places, but these places had to be discovered by a different Lama. This is a list of the Lamas who came to Pachakshiri: Kham Kathog Lama Sogyal Rinpoche, Lama Lodre Gyamtso, Yabme Pawo Dorje, Taktsan Nulden Dorje, Orgyen Chögyur Dechen Lingpa, Chöje Lingpa from Powo with his father and brother, Chöje Lingpa from Kham, Taklung Ngawang Trakpa, Lama Thondrup, and Lama Pasang. He was the last from outside. After him, and in between the other Lamas' visits, local Lamas were in charge. Chöje Lingpa wished, "Because it is difficult to come to the place, someone who is born in the year of the monkey should come and be in charge of the place." This person was Kunsang Dechen Rangdrol from Bhutan. After he passed away, his son Trinley Norbu Chöwang Naksang is now responsible.

This version of the story focuses upon the adventures and acts of specific Lamas who, by means of their power as accomplished Buddhist masters, defined the boundary of the *Beyül*, but yet not in finalised form: the key hidden at Künse Lhakhang promises the option of expansion to the south in a future time.



Figure 7.7. Pemajeling with meditation caves to the right (photograph by Kerstin Grothmann, 2009).

It might be possible to throw some additional light upon aspects of the migration of the Memba by identifying several historical Lamas who are key figures in the story and still relevant to the Memba today, namely Lama Lodre Gyamtso and Tertön Chöje Lingpa. Because of his founding deeds in the narrative, Lama Lodre Gyamtso has a primary significance in the oral tradition. There are two interesting candidates

who might be identified with him. If we ask the Memba today about the identity of Lama Lodre Gyamtso, they answer that he was the Merag Lama and founder of the Tawang monastery in Mönnyul to the west. In some accounts, Merag Lama and his disciples are forced to leave their religious properties in northeast Bhutan, and retreat to the Tawang area where they establish their new monastery.⁴⁷ This identification reflects Memba traditions about earlier migrants to Pachakshiri coming from the Tawang region. Another Lodre Gyamtso was the hero who first opened up the famous Rongkor pilgrimage route at Tsari, not far to the west of Pachakshiri. His journey was a result of flight from his home area due to a murder.⁴⁸ He is of interest because Tsari is clearly assimilated to Pachakshiri in the beginning of the Memba narrative, and his role at both Tsari and Pachakshiri were essentially the same: a Lama who ventures down into a wild valley south of the Himalayan divide where the Lopa live and who successfully traverses and opens the area for others to come in and consolidate. Beyond any speculations about his exact identity, we note that tradition places both Lodre Gyamtso candidates as being active sometime between the 1640s and the beginning of the eighteenth century and thus contradicts the claim in the text that he was a contemporary of Thangtong Gyalpo, who lived during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The other significant early actor in the Memba story of Pachakshiri is Chöje Lingpa, who was active around the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Various sources place his activities at the three Tibetan Buddhist sanctuaries that extend south of the Himalayas in the eastern zone, namely Tsari, Pachakshiri and Pemakö, all of which are identified as ‘hidden lands’ of refuge and realisation by various practitioners and schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Some sources have it that Chöje Lingpa went to Pemakö during the Dzungar invasion of Central Tibet in 1717, where he eventually converted local Lopa to Buddhism.⁴⁹

We currently lack adequate historical support to be certain about the

⁴⁷ The Merag Lama, Lodre Gyamtso, born at Berkhar village near Tawang, was a contemporary of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682), and also of the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651?) of Bhutan. Michael Aris identified this same Lodre Gyamtso as the Lama Nagseng (Bla ma Nag seng) of Merag mentioned in an important Bhutanese historical document dating from the second half of the seventeenth century; see Aris 1997:18-19, Aris 1986:99-101, 107, 119, n.36, Sarkar 2006:7-12.

⁴⁸ See Huber 1999:155.

⁴⁹ Lazcano 2005:47 writes of Chöje Lingpa: “In 1717, in the middle of the invasion of Lhasa by the Dzungar Mongols, he headed for Padma bkod by way of sPo yul, where he passed on his teachings to the Klo pa and converted many of them.” A small statue of Chöje Lingpa exists in the old monastery in Mechukha valley and is said to have miraculously survived two destructions of the site.

presence and activities of figures such as Lodre Gyamtso and Chöje Lingpa in the Memba story. Nevertheless, the elements associated with these figures are consistent on two points. Firstly, they are all connected, in one way or another, with the idea of taking refuge and founding new religious communities and institutions in marginal places south of the main eastern Himalayan watershed. Secondly, they suggest migration into Pachakshiri may be dated to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF ORIGIN AND MIGRATION STORIES

As I pointed out above, texts in the form of guidebooks provide useful information for pilgrims who are unfamiliar with the holy places they visit. But this doesn't really apply to the Memba who are all familiar with their whole valley and its religious aspects. We have to ask why the oral tradition about origin and migration into Pachakshiri is still a vibrant part of contemporary life in the Memba community?

One answer to the above question is that, in spite of Memba stories about cultural superiority due to their possession of a script that their southern neighbours lack, there is a real absence of proper literacy in Tibetan. Awareness of this, especially on the part of a few literate persons who function as local 'cultural experts', makes the transmission of oral traditions more acutely important for the sake of maintaining the past as a viable resource for the community. Storytelling also is still a much appreciated form of entertainment, as I witnessed when out in the valley with older, knowledgeable persons who could tell stories about the Pachakshiriba's history to younger, enthusiastic hearers who were engaged in their daily business between village and fields.

The on-going negotiation of local and external identities is also associated with oral stories about Pachakshiri's past. This is partly in terms of statements of self-consciousness and distinctiveness towards Tibetans, whom the Memba feel have always looked down upon them to some degree as dwellers in a border zone between civilised and uncivilised worlds. The Memba do not think of themselves as the people who, according to the label *Mönpa*, were subjugated and converted to Buddhism. They are rather the chosen people who, despite their diverse origins, form a new and ideal society within which threatened religion will be preserved. This is only one component of a much more complex, and often also positive, identity relationship with Tibetans today.⁵⁰ Closer

⁵⁰ In recent times, the attitude towards Tibetans in exile has changed as the Memba benefit from the support of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. For example, there are quotas for

to home, the oral traditions are a statement of superiority over the neighbouring non-Buddhist groups and of local rights in relation to outsiders. They act as a resource against potential territorial bids by neighbouring communities who claim to have been originally settled in Pachakshiri during earlier times before integration by the modern Indian state. Thus, the boundaries defined in the stories by the activities of Lamas, and features in the landscape such as foot prints, meditation caves or religious monuments, are revitalised by the oral tradition and also now by new pilgrimage processions associated with them. Furthermore, Mechukha has become the site of a very large Indian military facility, which has also brought with it certain religious claims over Memba sites within the valley.⁵¹

The lively local oral tradition about Pachakshiriba origins and history is finally a response to the official tribal label applied to the community by the Indian administration. To a certain degree, the Pachakshiriba do pragmatically identify themselves with their official tribal identity when they deal with the administration or with other tribal groups. But the name Memba is perceived by them as a degradation, and among themselves the older name Nänang is still in use. In spite of the various benefits they should and sometimes do receive due to their status as an official Scheduled Tribe, resentments against the Indian state are just below the surface in relation to their official identification. As one informant put it: “ST [Scheduled Tribe] and SC [Scheduled Caste] are there to uplift the backward people. Even I don’t feel like backward, but the government made us backward. Even the CM [Chief Minister, Dorjee Khandu, a Mönpa from Tawang] is backward; we have to accept that we are backward.”⁵²

Memba students to attend Tibetan exile schools and monasteries in India. During the Chinese invasion in 1962, some Memba even took the chance and joined the wave of Tibetans fleeing to India and proclaimed themselves to be refugees.

⁵¹ After 1987, a Gurudwara was established there by the Sikhs serving in the Indian Army. The meditation cave called Pemashelphug were Padmasambhava once meditated, now also houses an image of Guru Nanak. The surroundings of the place are well maintained by the Sikhs, and the cave is strikingly advertised with a local notice board, and also in publications as a meditation place of Guru Nanak. See also Huber 2008:245-46.

⁵² Interview with Dawa Tashi Naksang from Tachingphanga in April 2008.

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